

# Theology and the World's Living Faiths

*Roland W. Scott*  
*Garrett Graduate School of Theology*

## I.

The tracing of Christian ecumenical thought concerning the relation of Christian faith to the world religions points at the outset to two recent developments. First, the different forms of religious existence, as well as the modes of their self-understanding have been substantially altered since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The social and political avalanches descending on the traditions of Asia and Africa during this time have changed the religious landscape and consequently the picture we have of it. We must believe that this period of critical transformation has had a decisive influence on those conditions that prepared the way for political and social responsibility. The religious life of the people has undergone a partial emancipation from customary forms of expression by a changing view of the world with an increasing concern for new forms of culture.

Another development particularly related to the ecumenical movement began with a Christian search for the meaning of human life and destiny in non-Christian thought and practice, in the wake of the events just noted the most active consideration has been given to the relations of the religions, and to the need for a meaningful Christian understanding of them. Enquiries during the last century and a half into various forms of religious existence and tradition have produced positive results in Christian understanding and attitude. The theological perspective has been deepened by those who have continued to work for an ever more complete comprehension of the "faiths" of Asia and Africa. No one attitude can be said to have prevailed at any time, even among the churches that recognize the significance of their mission in the world as

one form of the fulfillment of their common search for Christian unity. Diversity of attitude and even theological disagreement have not detracted from the notable achievements of the past sixty years.

While Christians in the ecumenical movement have not reached a common understanding of the meaning of human existence as found in the other religious systems, the theological process has nevertheless been productive. In 1955 the Study Department of the World Council of Churches reported that though it had attempted (at Davos) to revive “the Tambaram debate”, the discussion apparently needed to proceed in relation to new situations and with different terms than those current at Tambaram.<sup>1</sup> H. Kraemer’s dogmatic thesis concerning Christian faith and the other religions raised issues to a large extent implicitly critical of, and radically at variance with, the results of the previous meeting of the International Missionary Council at Jerusalem in 1928. By his scrutiny and sifting of the work of his predecessors from as early as the second century, A.D. Kraemer saw himself contributing to the “common ecumenical effort of Christian thinking on the non-Christian religions.” Jerusalem’s investigation of the other religions had been largely a development of the presuppositions underlying the extensive enquiry pursued in preparation for the World Missionary Conference in 1910. But dissatisfaction was expressed with the method of evaluation followed by those who planned and executed the Jerusalem meeting because of the fear that what was being sought actually lead in the direction of a dangerous syncretism. The “Biblical realism” that rose to the zenith of theological attention at the Tambaram meeting reflected not only the dominant movement in European Protestant theology; it also produced the dialectical situation afterwards known as the Tambaram debate. The criterion by which this theological realism nudged all religions, including Christianity itself decisively turned attention from “a universal idea of religion” to the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ. This, we may believe, was its major result. While the trend changed from the search for religious values to the interpretation of biblical revelation, it did not lead to a resolution of the issues.

Ecumenical thinking has moved on with events, although the goal ever since the early part of the century has remained the same, namely, the presentation of “Christianity to the minds of the non-Christian people,” as it was stated in 1910 to be.<sup>2</sup> Later, the Christian message, or the Gospel of Christ took the place of the term “Christianity” which meanwhile had come to carry the heavy burden in the East of Western cultural religion.

1 *Study Bulletin*, I, No. 2, page 22.

2 *World Missionary Conference*, Edinburgh, Vol. IV, p. 1.

The Christian message continued to have universal meaning, whether in the setting of Faith and Order at Lausanne in 1927, or in the context of world mission at Jerusalem in 1928. The churches' understanding of themselves in the constantly changing character of their mission called for no essentially different formulation of the message than in their first steps toward unity. Both in expressing the "widespread desire for unity" and in seeking to make known the Christian "message to the world" they found themselves encountering "secularism" on the one hand, and the non-Christian religions on the other. While the method of attempting a collective understanding in the earliest ecumenical meetings succeeded to a remarkable degree, the failure later to agree on some issues cannot be attributed to less effective methods of enquiry, or to the more varied composition of the conferences. I believe that several new factors are apparent in this situation: (i) The increasing understanding and appreciation of the other religions as embodying truth as well as error. (ii) The changing relationships of the nations of East and West, including Africa, with a steadily diminishing influence of colonial attitudes among western Christians. (iii) A resurgence of eastern religions, revealing a vitality that contradicted the earlier assumptions about their lack of vigor. (iv) New forms of non-Christian cultic and sectarian life that assumed a missionary posture for the ancient religions in the modern world. And (v) the self-judgment of Christians regarding the nature of Christianity as religion, and the meaning of Christian faith among the other religious faiths.

Particular attention has to be given to the theological implications of the questioning at the Jerusalem meeting, which referred to the situation of missions and churches in non-western cultures. The way of dealing with this later at Tambaram centered around the theme presented in Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, and the theological dialogue that was created within the ecumenical household. At this point it may be questioned whether the attempt to reach agreements in a propositional form can ecumenically succeed. And it must also be questioned whether such a method offers a useful way of meeting with men of other faiths. In the present transition of theological thinking Christian faith may not be expressed in ways agreeable to most participants in an effort to consider the Christian relation to other faiths. Attempts must continue, however, to push the frontiers of understanding and theological meaning beyond the former landmarks to the place where the nature and purpose of the Church's mission in the world today can be discerned. The Church not only sees itself in this light, but it also meets men engrossed in a life for

which there is no church, and men for whom their traditional religions provide new meaning and satisfaction.

## II.

Orientation to the ecumenical situation as it is conditioned by non-Christian forms of existence in the modern world is possible by means of certain historical and theological observations.

1. The concrete forms of ecumenical unity, which the Christian churches have sought, center in the definitive meaning of Jesus Christ for the faith of the Church. This has significance in two ways. First, it is missionary in character as the terminology shows. W. A. Visser't Hooft notes that "when the term *oikoumene* is first used for the Christian Church itself, it is accompanied by the warning...that ecumenical concern is sterile without evangelistic and missionary concern."<sup>3</sup> Although the motivation of ecumenical unity at first and now is "that the world may believe," the World Council of Churches itself posed the problem of the relation of mission and unity from an early time.<sup>4</sup> A tension does exist between the missionary and the ecclesiastical conceptions of unity. Though at present it may appear unimportant in view of the preoccupation with the theological and practical problems in the way of attaining unity in any form, the tension remains, and in the light of ecumenical developments, especially since the conclusion of the second Vatican Council, it will continue to show the normative direction for both ecclesiology and theology of mission. The decisive factor now is the existential urgency of the problem of understanding the meaning of the other religious systems and men's commitments to them. The Christological character of the continuing search for more adequate expressions of missions and unity prevents the adoption of a conception of the brotherhood of religions in order to encounter the hostile, secular world. Ecumenical unity, which belongs to their concern of the Christian for the community of faith to which he is committed, is a particular that is not to be found in a search for religious universals. This does not preclude, however, Christians from collaborating with men of other religious communities.<sup>5</sup> In fact, such collaboration is expressly desired.

3 *Meaning of Ecumenical*, pp. 11-12.

4 Cf. Hans Margull, *Hope in Action*, pp. 230ff.

5 Cf. J. Wach, *Types of Religious Experience*, ch. 2. Also John Fleming, "Asian Churches and their Unity," in *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology*, July 1966, p. 15.

The second point of significance is that the ecumenical movement does not seek to embody all religious institutions into a universal community of faith. However much one may appreciate the spirit of tolerance that animates movements for religious understanding, an assumption of the basic sameness of the religions does not belong to an ecumenical theology. It suggests instead that we should look for the source in a common awareness of humanity that is basic to the social and cultural creativity found today in all religious communities. The self-understanding of different religious groups ought not to be forced into a philosophical structure of thought that violates any one of them. For the present we must simply assert "the new emphasis laid in all religions today on the fact of our common humanity." The ecumenical consultation at Nagpur, India, that culminated in a series of meetings from Jerusalem to Hong Kong in 1960-61, declared:

"There is also evidence in contemporary religious renaissance of a recognition of responsible human decisions in the making of history. It would no longer be true to say that Asian religions encourage an attitude of passive resignation and inactivity in the here and now. On the contrary, there is a new activism which draws on religious sources and finds expression in collective endeavor to realize new social goals."<sup>6</sup>

The new emphasis, it must be noted, comes from the realization of cultural conditions that enhance the possibility of religious discourse among those who share a positive attitude toward history, and man's freedom in contributing to the making of the human world. We need not fully designate the Christian sources of meaning for this understanding of human life in order to appreciate what immense significance it can have for the other "faiths."

2. Theological interpretation must be undertaken in the course of the inter-religious dialogue so commonly featured at present in the Christian approach to men of other faiths. Without a clear understanding of the purpose of dialogue the aim will be ambiguous for a method that men of different traditions are asked to follow. The reason is not that Christians assume the question of conversion will arise. They may do so, or they may not. Thus, Paul Tillich in his encounter with Buddhists in Japan rejected conversion as the intention of dialogue. The Kandy Consultation sponsored by the World Council of Churches, on the other hand, clearly held out conversion and baptism as possible consequences of dialogue, but

distinctly avoided any reference to them as necessary or even implied. The importance of a theological interpretation has been recognized in Japan and India where a “theology of dialogue” is being explored, and where dialogue itself is being attempted.<sup>7</sup>

Dialogue calls for a common spirit of mutual exchange and a kinship of understanding that cannot be obtained in widely disparate milieus. While the introduction may be friendly, and the presuppositions free from superior and absolutist attitudes the interpretation of what is to take place must for the theologically minded Christian have a Christological basis. But must that same basis with its soteriological intention become the very invitation to dialogue? The Kandy Consultation seems to say that it should:

“God’s love and purpose of salvation extend to all mankind, of every century, country and creed. He saves the world in and through Jesus Christ. Salvation in Christ has often been too narrowly understood...It means light in darkness, liberation from all that oppresses, joy for those who mourn, and life out of death. It is total fulfillment of the meaning of human existence.”<sup>8</sup>

The meaning of this unexceptionable assertion, for the Christian men who made it raises no problem, but a point of disagreement shows itself at the very start when the question of the meaning of dialogue for the men of other “faiths” comes up. To this the Consultation could in the end only say:

“We are not agreed among ourselves whether or not it is part of God’s redemptive purposes to bring about an increasing manifestation of the Savior within other systems of belief, as such...The spirit of dialogue should anyway prevent our dogmatism on this subject.”<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile it is to be noted that the brief attempt at a theological view of the “other religions” did not succeed in that particular attempt. The problem has not been fully studied recently in an ecumenical way, although

7 E.g. *Japanese Religions*, Vol., 3, No. 1, Inter-religious Dialogue, Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, India, pp. 1-37, 55-64.

8 *Study Encounter*, Vol. III, No. 2, p. 53.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 56.



Roman Catholic theologians are dealing somewhat extensively with the question of revelation and salvation in the other religions.<sup>10</sup>

3. Inter-religious dialogue presupposes an attitude of cultural openness, and Christians must recognize the influence this will have on their interpretations of faith. A question arises at the beginning. Can the dialogue take place when each man presents his version of faith as the final and only revealed for of religious truth? A viable hermeneutic requires that the influence of culture on theological interpretation be recognized. The task of theology, then, includes the continuous weighing of the positive and negative influences of culture on the expressions of the Christian faith. This is one reason why Christians seem more ready than others to initiate a dialogue in which the risks are acknowledged. A contemporary Jew of the reform tradition can say, "It is Christianity, and not just the Christian, which is on the whole eager to initiate and enter dialogue; it is Judaism, rather than just the Jew, which is, by and large passive, silent and reluctant."<sup>11</sup> Yet he sees a change in the attitude of modern Jewry from the traditional silence, which has inherited in Judaism. How may this be accounted for? "For an answer we must turn to the cultural and social conditions that characterize Jewish life in the modern world. Jewish openness can be seen as an outcome of the emancipation of Jewry within Western civilization. Emancipation signals the end of isolation."<sup>12</sup> Since Christianity is an organic dimension of Western culture, the Jew, emerging from a ghetto existence into the full stream of Western life, encounters Christianity "not only at very close quarters, but, so to speak, from within." The new possibility of religious understanding, for which dialogue is designed, can only be found in the conditions of a culture that encourages rather than disallows the more profound awareness of each religious heritage, whether it be Christian, Jewish, or other.

Commitments of faith are not set aside in the process of dialogical exchange, but they should not be made cultural outposts of external

10 Cf. H.R. Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions*. Hans Kung in *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, (Joseph Neuner, S. J., editor) states: "A man is to be saved within the religion that is made available to him in his historical situation. Hence it is his right and his duty to seek God within that religion in which the hidden God has already found him." Also, *Le Salut sans l'Evangile.*, H. Nys.

11 Mo Vogel, "The Problem of Dialogue between Judaism and Christianity" in *Education in Judaism*, Vol. 15, No. 2.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 6. THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

defense.<sup>13</sup> They are essential and they are to be affirmed. But what more distinct religious value could be found in modern secular culture than the neutral ground for exchange it offers men of different religious commitments? On this new basis the superiority and hostility generated in the past by Western Christianity in Eastern areas should disappear. At the same time, the notion of the essentially religious and spiritual character of the people of the East, as compared with the materialistic nature of Western life cannot be a religious model for a time when Asia, too, under goes secularization, and Asians are heard to ask whether they are approaching an era of no religion at all.<sup>14</sup>

The new human frontier is the place of meeting for religious men of all traditions as they recognize that they have been conditioned by a technological and humanizing culture. Man, realizing his existence in this flux of desire and concern, has moved the religions out of isolation into a demanding proximity where they must learn to exist together. As appears to have happened in China, the religions may be forced into a new isolation from the real concerns of contemporary life. Christians for some time now have been accustomed to call the responses of the traditional religions to these dynamic forces, the renaissance of the old faiths.<sup>15</sup> Christianity itself shows the effects of a variety of influences with their resulting theological interpretations. The Christian theologian cannot assume that he speaks from a position of cultural security; in fact, he begins to enquire today about the nature of the theological situation in the West itself.<sup>16</sup> The task of the theologian then becomes the interpretation of Christian faith in consideration of the results of cultural anthropology and the history of religions, as well as in the light of biblical and historical studies of Christian existence. H. Kraemer saw a new day approaching when he wrote:

“Besides the dialogue of the metaphysical order, the meeting of East and West in their religio-cultural manifestations requires a re-thinking of the Christian faith and its meaning in contact and exchange with these Eastern religions.”<sup>17</sup>

13 Cf. K. W. Bolle, “History of Religions, Hermeneutics, Christian Theology”, *Essays in Divinity*, Kitagawa, ed., p. 110.

14 Song Choan-seng, “Confessing the Faith in Today’s World.” *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 8, p. 104. J. Russell Chandran, “Confessing the Faith in Asia Today,” *Ibid.*, p. 92.

15 Chandran, *Ibid.*, p. 92.

16 Cf. D. D. Williams, “The New Theological Situation,” *Theology Today*, Jan. 1968.

17 *World Cultures and World Religions*, p. 375.



The historical religions are confronted with the reality of human existence in a new way, for it is by the activity of men and women who personally experience renascence that the secularizing society removes some of the old land marks. If the “faiths” are living, as the ecumenical theme indicates, it is in the person of those who have become aware of themselves and their societies as actually working toward historically relevant goals. Christian theology is thus called on to clarify and direct understanding so that Christians can embody in the new universalizing culture of freedom the authentic meaning of faith in Christ. Theology is also under the necessity of interpreting the meaning of the new historical existence that other religious men have begun to sense for themselves.

In this situation dialogue becomes not only a cultural possibility but a theological necessity within the milieu that fosters it. The Christian has a special interest in the outcome of this effort to understand the present critical meeting of religions in world history, because Christian faith has helped to create it, and the Church continues to have a concern for its direction. When cultural emancipation takes place, bringing men into the open who are seeking to be responsible in the world, the Christian must begin by asking what this means for the traditional spirituality characterizing each of the different religions. The new situation also causes the question of religious conversion to be raised quite explicitly, for the peril of confounding the cultural and spiritual elements in conversion has never been so real as today. It is necessary at the same time to enquire what is happening to Christianity itself as it responds to similar secular forces designed to achieve human goals. Nothing will be gained on a deserted front by ever so bold a theological tactic, but theological problems in the direction of human justice and freedom in secularized culture will help men of whatever religious tradition to know the dimensions of Christian faith. P. D. Devanandan observed that “on the frontiers of renascent faiths, doctrinal barriers no longer foreclose commerce. The outburst of newness of life in the resurgent non-Christian religions is due to increasing traffic across the border.”<sup>18</sup> When accounting for this phenomenon he suggested that the secular plays the role of *Christ incognito*, awakening the ancient religions to responsible existence in the world.<sup>19</sup> If men of the “living faiths” come to a new understanding of their place in history and of the human values it achieves for them, the theologian must also reach a fresh self-understanding. Devanandan, it would appear, realized this fully when he turned from the exclusive emphasis on revelation to “the human aspects

18 *Preparation for Dialogue*, pp. 190-91.

19 In *Inter-religious Dialogue*, H. J. Singh, ed., p. 27.

in God's redemptive action man as he really is, the creature for whose sake Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead."<sup>20</sup>

So Christian theology must be subjected to its own kind of judgment. There are, of course, non-Christian appraisals of Christianity, but another judgment must be heard which has criteria, as Paul Tillich said, in "the event on which Christianity is based ... which is the appearance and reception of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ ..."<sup>21 22</sup> From this standpoint it is possible to understand all religions, including Christianity, which as religion can claim no special status nor can it be exempt, but must be subjected to self-criticism in the reality of Jesus Christ. It must be noted that Tillich himself, in the last of his published lectures on this subject, seemed to be less certain about the finality of this criterion as "a central event in the history of religions."<sup>23</sup>

One assumption of the religious dialogue is that the cultural situation is not only relevant; it determines to some degree the understanding that will emerge in the course of the exchange. This presents a hermeneutical problem for it cannot be assumed that a theology developed in the context of Western secular culture will be understood in the religious depths of Asian cultures. The universalist tendencies of the West are derived mainly from its religious basis and may therefore be expected to help in forming the interpretation of Western Christianity to religious men in other situations. Such an interpretation was not actually possible in the colonial period of Asian and African history, but now that the most serious cultural barriers to understanding have been removed there is no reason to believe that the universal meaning of the Christian Gospel is limited any longer by them. When secular and religious historians refer to the superior attitudes of Western Christians in the East as due to their "provincialism," the judgment is a cultural one.<sup>24</sup> But it refers in part to the absolute claims made in the form and content of theological systems, and in part to the mistaken assumptions of Christians regarding the nature and meaning of the other faiths. The attitude of superiority formerly expressed in the self-understanding of Western man has now no place in the thinking or activity of those who would humbly interpret Christian faith.

4. When the future of the historical religions becomes a matter of question, the meaning of religion in a secular world has to be clarified.

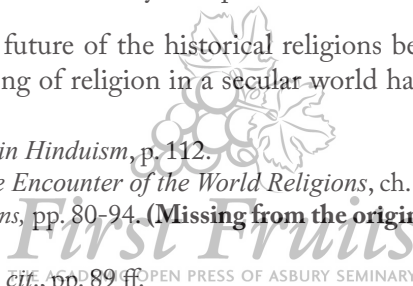
20 *Christian Concern in Hinduism*, p. 112.

21 *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, ch. 4.

22 *The Future of Religions*, pp. 80-94. (Missing from the original.)

23 *Ibid.*, p. 81

24 Cf. K. W. Bolle, *op. cit.*, pp. 89 ff.



Actually, in history as we experience it, the abolition of the separate religions can hardly be visualized. If a theological system abolishes the religions this is not a matter of fact, it is a theological judgment that bears no relation to the history of religions. The religions may and will change; they may be reconceived as is actually happening now. But from the perspective of any or all of them, what is understood to be religious will continue to be the source of meaning for people in this world. Karl Rahner's thought is valid at this point:

"To begin with, however much we must always work, suffer and pray anew and indefatigably for the unification of the whole human race, in the one Church of Christ, we must nevertheless expect, for theological reasons and not merely by reason of a profane historical analysis, that the religious pluralism existing in the world and in our own historical sphere of existence will not disappear in the foreseeable future."<sup>25</sup>

In whatever way the relation of the sacred and the secular is conceived, both have meaning for men in the East as well as the West. The debate over the meaning of secularity for human existence will go on within Christian theology, though it is doubtful that the issues will have the same critical significance in Asia and Africa as in the West. If this secularity is a virus injected by Western civilization into the non-Western areas, as has been suggested, a question is raised for the mission of the Church.<sup>26</sup> Should Christians welcome secularization as a means of confronting the other religions with the critical questions of their existence in the modern world? Here it is possible to find a positive meaning of the secular in the course of biblical history where all forms of human existence are under the judgment and mercy of the living God. When Arend van Leeuwen suggests that Christianity will remain in cognition within Western civilization as it spreads over the world, and when he raises the theological question of the future of the religions in a secularized world, the problem is an existential one for all the religions.<sup>27</sup>

The present optimism shown in some areas of theological interest about the meaning of secularization for Christian religious life may be a reaction to the earlier fears expressed about the threat of secularism for religion. In any case, a theological interpretation is needed that shows the cultural ambivalence of the secular in its effects upon the religious

25 *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 5, p. 133.

26 A. van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*, pp. 349ff.

27 *Ibid.*, 16 ff., 426-7.

dimensions of human life in every culture. This should come out of the situation in which the meaning of modernization for the traditional cultures is sought as an integral part of the religious search for meaning in the new societies of Asia and Africa.

While the theological situation is not clear the need is still expressed for a new Christian attitude in relation to men of other religious faith. The Consultation on Christian-Muslim relations at Brummana (1966) discussed the role of secularization “in God’s providential ordering of human history.” The participants discovered themselves in need of clarity and agreement. In the end they said:

“It is high time that Christians engaged in far more conversation with Muslims. Negative and polemical attitudes are obviously to be avoided; what is needed is mutual acquaintance, ripening into genuine friendship ... The basis of intercourse should be the Muslim’s, as well as the self-understanding and belief about man.”<sup>28</sup>

The statement calls attention to the illumination of this and other problems “by what God has to say to us through actual encounter with men and women of other faiths.” The concrete act of encountering becomes a source of the theological understanding necessary in dialogue.

To make the most of the present time with apostolic concern should be at the center of the theological undertaking. The Mexico City meeting of the World Council of Churches’ Commission on World Mission and Evangelism dealt positively with both secularization and mission. There the questions of understanding both men of other faiths and men in the secular world were considered in terms of Christian witness. The concern for the meaning of the Christian mission in relation to the other religions thus became a matter of knowing the nature of the religious existence of men in their present situation. And it also became a matter of knowing how to make the Christian witness meaningful in the situation where the “missionary movement now involves Christians in all six continents and in all lands...We do not yet see all the changes this demands; but we go forward in faith, God’s purpose still stands: to sum up all things in Christ.”<sup>29</sup>

At the Davos Consultation the concepts of “faith” and the “faiths of men” were chosen instead of religion and the religions. That meeting “seemed to prefer to describe the non-Christian religions as faiths rather

28 *Op. cit.*, para B.5.

29 *Witness in Six Continents*, R. Orchard, editor, p. 175.

than religions, laying less emphasis on the doctrinal and systematic aspects and paying greater attention to the personal response of the individual believer.”<sup>30</sup> This was not a wholly new departure in the ecumenical sense, for the World Missionary Conference in 1910 expressed concern for the Christian message, not to systems but to persons.<sup>31</sup> The value of Kraemer’s later work consisted largely in his thorough dealing with faith in terms of Christian revelation in its relation to religion.<sup>32</sup> The distinction between faith and religion has implications for theology, the only discipline that legitimately speaks of faith. Faith as a reality of human existence cannot be comprehended in phenomenology, though this form of study contributes to the understanding of faith. Van der Leeuw in his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* reached the final consideration of phenomenology in the meaning of the “mediator,” which he stated was “the region that proved to be inaccessible throughout our previous discussions of the world and the church, of guilt and faith. For Christian faith the figure of the mediator is no phenomenon”; the phenomenologist cannot perceive where and how it enters history...the mediator of revelation has become revelation itself; the Word became flesh; and henceforth every revelation of God conforms to the sole revelation in Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

When Christian theology takes the religious systems and forms of existence into account, the nature and meaning of ultimate salvation have to be considered. The question whether there is salvation outside the Christian Church, and whether men have known the living God from within other religious systems is a subject of theological concern and even systematization. H. R. Schlette’s work is a recent example of the attempt to embody the answer in a systematic statement consistent with the Roman Catholic tradition.<sup>34</sup> While salvation of the individual in the other religions is admitted, the more difficult question of the ultimate meaning, value and truth of the religious systems themselves remains for Christian theology to consider. What is to be made of the question? It must be agreed that there is little precedent in the Bible for a consideration of religions as organized systems of life and patterns of human destiny. For individuals and nations, and for religious forms of behavior and meaning, yes; but of systems and organizations of spirituality with philosophical and ethical meaning, the Bible has relatively little or nothing to say. Theology

30 *Study Bulletin*, Vol., 1, No. 2, pp. 22 ff.

31 *Op., cit.*, p. 279.

32 Cf. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, p. 286. Kraemer notes that Tillich rightly calls faith the typically Biblical form of existence. P. 445.

33 Chapter 106.

34 Cf. H.R. Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions*, pp. 14-6.

must therefore be extremely careful when stepping into this area, if it is not to be lost in rational abstraction.

The term “religion” in its present usage is too ambiguous for a clear understanding of the significance of the real encounters of men, especially when these can be quite secular in form and intention. As Bishop Newbigin has pointed out, the real meeting place of Christian and non-Christian today is in their humanity rather than in the traditional area of the classical religions.<sup>35</sup> When the ecumenical discussion moved to the meaning of faith and the living faiths of men it was not a mere change of terms that was intended. Rather the change was from the systematic and propositional form of theological discussion about the nature of religion and the religions to a recognition of the existential reality that must inform inter-religious discussions. Christian theology must now deal with this existential reality in a way that not only distinguishes the meanings of faith in the different religious systems, but also clarifies the meaning of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious life in relation to secular understandings of existence. Thus a strong affirmation can be made for faith as the basis and meaning of “Asia’s social and cultural awakening to the personal dimension of human existence, and its quest for its adequate interpretation and spiritual foundation,” which is also a relevant preparation for the Christian mission.<sup>36</sup> For Christian theology the personal meaning of faith is an integral part of the understanding of the revelation in Jesus Christ as it relates to the questions men in all religious contexts are asking about their present existence.

### III.

Christians now speak of studying “the faiths by which men live in this mid-twentieth century.”<sup>37</sup> But can the religions be legitimately called “living faiths” as in the ecumenical expression? In seeking to answer this question we are directed to the reality that lives, and is given expression in each religious community. The cultural forms that have had traditional force and meaning in connection with each religion are now undergoing change, and in some instances this is of a radical character. Non-Christians who are responsible for the ongoing movement into modern cultural existence, and for the interpretation of religion in this process, like to dissociate the living reality of religion from the obsolescent forms

35 M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, p. 95.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

37 Kandy Consultation, 1967, “Christians in Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths.”



in which it has been held. As new forms emerge, they show a vital reality that appears as the source of the renascence of religion. This is what we mean when we speak of the appeal to the vitality of human existence in the religions today. The man who is the personal being of the mid-twentieth century world, searches for meaningful goals in individual and social life and thus puts himself at the center of religious concern.

Living faiths, then, are ways presently and ultimately meaningful for men in their concern for human life and destiny. That there are distinctive ways of understanding the reality of each religion, which lies beyond the contingent and transitory conditions of existence, must be accepted as a fact. Clear differences among the faiths must be asserted. As a contemporary Buddhist observes concerning Buddhism and Christianity, "They both start as wanderers between darkness and light...and yet they march along two paths that are entirely different from each other."<sup>38</sup> A living faith is the valid and true way by which men understand the existing form and meaning of their particular religion. Such faith is real and true for those who apprehend existence in its depth according to their own religion, and express it in appropriate language, symbols and actions, which are both individual and communal. The problem for all religious people, including Christians, is how these different forms of meaningful existence are to be understood and related. Can this be done in a theological and systematic fashion? This is a crucial question which Christians, who have initiated and pursued inter-religious studies in all parts of the world, are bound to ask themselves. For the theological enquiry goes to the heart of the religious question, as various faiths are evaluated, each from its distinctive point of view.

As we have seen in the ecumenical movement, a Christian perspective on the problem of the meaning and the relation of the religions is found primarily in the attempt to interpret them as living forms of existence. For the Christian, faith is the form of existence that leads to an understanding of the reality beyond all form and expression. Christian faith is religious faith in the Christian context of meaning, where man knows himself ultimately by what God discloses Himself to be in Christ the man. This man, revealing the meaning of human existence in sickness and health, in guilt and forgiveness, in life and death, gives other men "the right to become children of God," and so he determines the meaning as

38 Fumio Masutani, "A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity" in *Christianity, Some Non-Christian Appraisals*, David W. McKain, editor, p. 146.

he discloses the reality of faith.<sup>39</sup> Christ is the center toward which the Christian interpretation of all religions must turn.

Christian theology, therefore, must be concerned with the authentic faith that is known in the depths of human existence, and it must in a responsible way seek to show how such authenticity is related to God in Christ. The task is one both of discovery and of interpretation. It points in the direction which Christians should move in the present world where the historic religions, encountering each other on many fronts, relate to each other in various ways.



*First Fruits*  
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

---

39 John 1:12